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# THERMOPYLAE

*NEWDIGATE VERSE, 1681*

BY

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HONORARY SCHOLAR OF BALLIOL

OXFORD

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Ἡροδότου σκιά.

*The Dorian lips are gone to dust,  
That once by the Italian sea  
Blew that Ionian strain that must  
Make musical Thermopylae  
In all men's ears and hearts to be,  
Who watch the tide of battle rolled,  
From Susa's palaces of gold,  
To break on Salamis, as thus  
They hear again the story told  
Polymnia told Herodotus.*

*H. C. B.*

*' Verè mendaces erant colles, et multitudo montium.'*

## *THERMOPYLAE.*

---

MIDWAY between the vintage and the spring,  
The apple-flower and apple-gathering,  
When the nights lingered from the longest day,  
And wheat was ripening, and the roads were grey  
With thirsty dust along the Phocian hills,  
And in their hollow beds the shrunken rills  
Fainted for heat of summer air aflame,  
From the Greek army at the Isthmus came  
A vanguard, sent to hold the pass whereby  
The Persian king must march from Thessaly.

For Oeta falls in precipices down  
Sheer to the sea, beside Anthela town,  
Leaving scant passage for a man to go  
Between the rocks above him, and below

Spercheius flooding all the marshy shore.  
Here after battle Heracles of yore  
Had found warm springs to bathe in : to this day  
They steam and bubble up beside the way,  
And spill themselves between the cliff and sea ;  
So that the place was called Thermopylae.

They therefore, some six thousand men in all,  
Marched to the pass, and built anew the wall,  
Built of old time by Phocians to restrain  
The wild Thessalian riders of the plain,  
Marauding through their valleys at their will  
When summer nights were cool on shore and hill.  
Here they encamped, and waited for the king ;  
Whose army, pouring with the break of spring  
Through Phrygia from its winter camp, had rolled  
Across the bridges of the ford of gold,  
Army and fleet together ; for at last  
The wheel had come full circle for the past ;  
Scamander on Spercheius flooded back,  
And Troy to Aulis on the self-same track  
Sent on thwart winds an answering tempest, driven  
Ruining on Europe out of all the heaven,

## *Thermopylae.*

7

With flash and tumult, as of old the fire  
That leapt from Ida for the queen's desire,  
News of the captured city ; thus it came,  
With signal answering signal, flame with flame ;  
Thus overstriding the long ridge of sea,  
The travelling torch's splendour joyously,  
Delaying not nor overborne of sleep,  
Kindled and flashed from steep to windy steep,  
Till on the palace roof in Argos town  
Smote the broad radiance, telling Troy was down.  
So now the Eastern host, a fire of doom,  
Drew forward, wrapping all its path in gloom ;  
The strength of Asia, splendor and more  
Than those whom Datis led ten years before  
Across the sea, a tempest backward blown  
Before the Athenian spears at Marathon.  
Four years together, in revenge for these,  
The empire through its hundred provinces  
From north to south had gathered, man by man,  
Persian and Mede, Bactrian and Cissian,  
Out of all lands to battle for the king ;  
And from the sunset and the sunrising

The double tribe of Aethiopian men,  
And infantry from Egypt's populous fen,  
And Sacian axes and Sarangian spears,  
Chorasmian horse and Indian charioteers,  
And Metonian and Mariandyne,  
And all who dwelt where, swoln with floods di-  
vine,

Tigris or Oxus or Hydaspes ran  
By hill and plain through spaces Asian.

And now the innumerable army lay  
Encamped at Trachis, by the Malian bay,  
Filling the broad Spercheius-dale with light  
And sound of armour ; while within their sight,  
Silent and unconcerned, across the way  
The Greeks kept guard, and through the summer  
day

Practised with quoit and javelin on the dry  
Cliff-shaded turf, while others quietly  
Sat combing their long hair outside the wall ;  
Seeming against their strength a force so small,  
They waited certain days, so be that they  
Might yet lose heart and leave an open way ;

Till the king wearying, in impatient scorn  
Bade them sweep clear the pass the morrow morn.

That night a summer storm on sea and plain  
Swept down with wet winged feet and lashing  
rain,

That rushed and streamed through Oeta's rocky  
walls,

Till all her sides were loud with waterfalls.

The fires glowed red and lightning glimmered  
pale

Across the gulf, where, sheltered from the gale,  
Beneath the Artemisian headland lay

The Greek fleet, couched like some wild beast at  
bay,

With angry eyes across the strait of sea

Watching the Persian camp at Aphetæ.

But with the morning from the plain below

The Medes and Cissians, eager towards the foe,  
Streamed forward through the vapour misty-grey,  
Shot through with splendour of returning day.

For hours they fought the narrow way to win ;  
But steadily the long Greek spears broke in,



Met them and pierced them, till, beat down and  
foiled,

Their line retreated like a snake uncoiled.

Again next day their bravest, with like fate,  
Assailed afresh the unconquerable gate,  
Swept back in ruin ; and when evening fell,  
Thermopylae yet stood impregnable.

Up the lone gorges where Asopus born  
Scatters its spray, a pathway, torrent-worn,  
Climbs the stern cliffs Oeteon, winding high  
Through tall straight-columned pines that ridge  
the sky,

Then plunges down a long deep-cloven ravine  
Through southward slopes thickset with oak woods  
green,

Till through their boughs the sea again gleams  
dim,

East of the guarded pass's eastern rim.

This way the Malian traitor up the height  
Led on a column through the dead of night ;  
And those who guarded the steep mountain way  
Awoke to hear, while yet the east was grey,

## *Thermopylae.*

11

Through the fallen leaves their heavy trampling,  
drawn

Nearer and louder in the hush of dawn ;  
And, panic-stricken, left their post and fled,  
Huddled together at the mountain head.

The great ascending column climbed and crossed,  
Descended eastward, and the pass was lost.

The army in the pass by rise of sun  
Knew all that human strength could do was done,  
Since now their mountain fortress needs must fall,  
And naught was left but fair retreat for all.  
For Sparta through her sacred month delayed,  
And none in Greece would move when Sparta  
stayed ;

Fear numbed their spirit and unnerved their hand,  
And even the sacred guardians of the land  
Fainted with terror of ill-ominous signs  
In Dodonaean or in Delphian shrines ;  
Pale as above their belt of myrtle trees  
Glimmer all night the moonlit Phædriades.  
But for the Spartan soldiers no retreat  
Was left, no backward pathway for their feet.

Though none behind them help or hope could send,  
Hopeless, they sternly waited for the end.  
To stay was death ; but how could they return,  
A beaten army, the reproach and scorn  
Of boys and stately women and elders grey,  
In hollow Lacedaemon far away ?

Thus in the golden morning, sad at heart,  
The camp broke up, and those who should depart  
Filed down the valley, while the fated few  
Watched their long line until it sank from view.  
Then, while the July sun began to climb,  
With shortening shadows toward full-market time,  
The Persians, multitudinous and elate,  
Streamed in slow masses towards the fatal gate ;  
And these last fourteen hundred, man by man,  
Spartan, Boeotian, and Thespian,  
Alone, outworn, outnumbered, yet with face  
Calm as if gathering to the holy place  
Upon this festal morning, even as they  
Who now, white-robed and chapleted with bay,  
Walked lightly on the green Olympian plain ;  
So calmly these, for what might yet remain,

Of all their glory sealing up the sum,  
Entered the valley whence they should not come.

Through noon and afternoon the battle burned,  
As wave on wave retreated and returned,  
With heavy surge of fight that rose and tossed  
Around them, ever where the long spears crossed  
In ruinous flight borne backward, and again  
The reflux onset and upsurge of men.  
Shield crashed on shield, spear shivered upon  
spear,

Hard iron broke on iron, and brass rang clear,  
Smitten and sundered with great strength of hand,  
On the low border of the fatal strand,  
Where, careless now of life, as those whose cry  
Is choked beneath deep waters, recklessly  
They charged the masses that about them swayed,  
Breaking and trampling through them, till they  
made

Such slaughter one might scarce clear-footed tread  
The meadow ground ; so thick it lay with dead.  
Themselves too dropping faster, as the day  
Waned, and their strength was slowly worn away.

The Spartan king was down, and round the king  
Their bravest, done with all their warfaring,  
Blood spattered on their faces swart and spare,  
And scarlet tunics and long golden hair.  
Yet still they fought, while through the ridge of  
spears

Flashed in their eyes and sounded in their ears  
Death, and about their feet and through their breath  
Death, and above their heads the shadow of death ;  
Till forced together, when the day grew late,  
They gathered on a hillock by the gate ;  
And while the swift continuous arrow-flight  
Hailed on their armour, and to left and right  
The hot air seemed to quiver, the earth to reel,  
Under the intolerable sleet of steel,  
With dagger or bare teeth or foot and hand,  
Fiercely, so long as they had strength to stand,  
The last of those who fought that day so well,  
Fought on, till fighting to the last they fell.

And the sun sank, and all the paths were  
grey ;  
The slow mist crept along the purple bay

And veiled the heavy marshes, and the light  
Glimmered through belts of shadow into night.  
With mingled shouts and clamour of diverse speech  
The victors wound their way along the beach.  
As when in April woods aflush with spring  
Dream of the time of longer days to fling  
On green recesses and untrodden vales  
Summer, and heat, and noise of nightingales ;  
So now the conquering army seemed to be,  
Now and tomorrow more abundantly,  
Like very gods upon the slopes of heaven ;  
Nor dreamed how soon this glory should be driven  
To helpless ruin, when in two months more,  
Beside the sacred Salaminian shore,  
A thousand wrecks should crowd the autumn sea  
And Salamis avenge Thermopylae.

But now among the Eastern host for all  
This was a night of joy and festival,  
Whatever lot the jealous fates had turned.  
Bright in the central camp's pavilion burned,  
In silver censers piles of spice and gum,  
Stacte and tragacanth and galbanum,

With thin red quivering flame and drowsy scent,  
That round the soft blue Tyrian hangings went,  
Where at his royal banquet sat the king  
Amid the Persian nobles, glorying.  
And all about the camp from line to line  
Fires blazed, and silver stood abrim with wine ;  
And over all the stars looked softly down ;  
While one slow cloud grew dark on Oeta's crown,  
And from it thunder rolled, and flying fire  
Ran out and vanished, as some god in ire  
Flamed from the summit with avenging tread ;  
Whereat the Persian army, pale with dread,  
Poured from their cups libation, marvelling  
What evil chance the coming days might bring,  
What shape of terror ; and the air grew chill  
Out of the east, and all the camp was still.

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